



“Filled with Awe: Communion”

Westminster Presbyterian Church
September 3, 2023

From Acts 2: 14, 22b-24, 36-47
by the Rev. Dr. Stacy C. Smith

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, God our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Our September/October Ministry Team has picked this wonderful passage from Acts, in which the apostles and the new converts to Christianity begin setting up the first church community, as our anchor text for the next few weeks. And as we begin a new season together, with new ministries and new opportunities, it's just a great story to turn to. "It follows directly after the story of Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit descended upon - the apostles, who were already following Jesus, but also people from all over the Roman world who had gathered in Jerusalem. Peter gives the first sermon of evangelism, explaining that what the people were experiencing is the gift of God's Spirit promised by the prophet Joel, and that this Holy Spirit is now poured out to them by the risen Christ. And the response to the sermon, as we might expect, is tremendous: three thousand people repented, and are baptized, and join the small Christian community in Jerusalem."¹

And not only did they join the church, but they got put on a committee, so to speak. They stuck around and studied with the apostles who knew Jesus, and they lived together in harmony. The scripture says pooled their resources, shared what they had, took care of each other, ate together, prayed together and they grew in number and in faith. And amazingly, these actions become the bedrock for church communities to this day. The scripture says that the disciples were engaged in teaching, fellowship, prayer, and breaking bread together. That includes the general act of eating food together, which we do often, and the act of communion,² which we will celebrate today.

¹ Adapted from Dr. Scott Shauf at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-acts-242-47-4>

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-acts-242-47-4>

It's sort of odd how this description of the community feels both pie in the sky, utopia, and also very familiar. I mean, I'm not saying we're quite ready to sell our earthly possessions and live in a commune – we're not right? that's not a chapter of Holy Conversations that I missed, is it? OK just checking. – So that part feels a little much, which we'll talk about some more in the coming weeks. But honestly the rest of it feels like a modern church, or at least what we strive to do as the church: fellowship, prayer, teaching, communion. That all sounds very familiar, right? It's kind of amazing how close we feel to the early church. You might even say it's awesome, or filled with awe.

What does that mean, filled with awe? What is awe? Again, this is something we're going to look at over the next few weeks, but we need someplace to start. So we've got a definition from Dr. Jonah Paquette who says that awe is “the feeling that comes when we're in the presence of something so vast and profound that it transcends our understanding of the world. It might come, he says, from seeing a beautiful vista, listening to an inspirational leader, watching an incredible athlete perform at the highest level, or countless other things – but the common experience is that we feel overwhelmed in its presence.”³ He goes on to say there are two conditions that are required to experience awe: first, we encounter something vast, either physically or conceptually; and second, the experience of that vastness forces us to change our assumptions to accommodate this new information. So again, awe is: we experience something vast, and then because of that experience, everything we thought before has to shift.

There are lots of places where we might find awe but for me, on this day that we celebrate communion, the first thing that came to mind was a meal. But this was not just any meal, OK, this was an awe-some meal. When Kevin was finally diagnosed with a glioblastoma, the most aggressive form of really any cancer, we knew that he had very limited time left and so set out to make the most of his good days. And so, in September of 2019, we left town for three weeks and traveled throughout the northeast. We went to Boston, we found his late father's decommissioned aircraft carrier in Philadelphia, we went sailing off Martha's Vineyard, we visited one of his favorite places, Colonial Williamsburg, he was a blacksmith, after all. But the best, the most incredible thing of the trip, was the meal we had at a restaurant called Per Se in New York City.

Per Se is a very, very, very fancy restaurant. It's a three Michelin star restaurant operated by Chef Thomas Keller, who was one of Kevin's favorites, who also has two other restaurants in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Do you all remember when Gavin Newsom, the governor of California, got in big trouble for going to a party at the

³ *Awestruck: How Embracing Wonder Can Help Make You Happier, Healthier, and More Connected* by Jonah Paquette, PsyD. Shambala, 2020, p. 6

beginning of COVID at the restaurant French Laundry? French Laundry is Thomas Keller. Per Se is very similar; it's located in the Time Warner buildings in Columbus Circle, maybe the most expensive address in New York.

And we showed up and it was simply unbelievable, almost like a modern version of Downton Abbey. We had 4 waiters serving us at any given time, plus a sommelier recommending wine, plus a maître d who I think is just professionally gracious. We were seated at a small circular table overlooking Central Park with white tablecloths made of probably hand-spun silk or something equally crazy. One of the funniest things I found was, when we were seated, they brought out this little stool for me, a purse stool I learned, so that I didn't have to place my purse on the ground. This is probably important for ladies who have a Birkin which averages over ten thousand dollars. I, on the other hand, was carrying the only bag I had with me, a brown Fossil travel bag, very well worn, that I bought for about \$40 in 1998. Nevertheless, I said thank you so much and gracefully placed a bag that had just 24 hours earlier had been awash in fish guts from Cape Cod on a stool designed just so it didn't have to touch the immaculate ground of this pristine restaurant.

And the food. The FOOD. We had the standard tasting menu, which was a 14 course meal, half of which, literally half, were desserts. I had 7 desserts that day. Plus – and now I'm just going to read from the menu a bit – “a sabayon of pearl tapioca with island creek oysters and Regiis Ova Siberian caviar, a ragu of black winter truffles with hen egg custard, butter-poached Maine lobster with marble potatoes, sungold tomatoes, and Italian parsley emulsion, and duck foie gras with a whole bunch of French words I can't pronounce. And, did I mention, 7 desserts? Confetti cake, an éclair, butter ice cream, chocolate cremaux, a 4-way peach infused tart, some kind of melty caramel bite that defies explanation, and a cinnamon dusted donut that is maybe the best single bit I have ever had. It was just what you think the fanciest meal of your life would be like, right. It was *vast*.

But as we made our way through this meal that Kevin so wanted to enjoy, it began to be clear that he wasn't really going to be able to enjoy the food itself. He had been having stomach problems for months due to his chemo and could only enjoy bits and pieces of the meal. He almost collapsed at the table and had to take several breaks to rest and recover himself. Once while he was gone to the bathroom I explained to the maître d why he hadn't eaten much – I don't think many people come to Per Se and then don't really eat the food. But they were incredibly kind, so much so at the end of my desserts, they brought us both back to the kitchen so we could meet the entire staff. We took a picture with maybe 20 folks from Per Se, and they also gave us a signed Thomas Keller cookbook.

And then finally, when they brought the bill, all it said was “Your meal is compliments of Per Se.” I won't say exactly much it was because I honestly don't know, but it was what you think a 14 course meal and wine pairing would be at the fanciest restaurant in the country. And I was literally speechless, something that doesn't often happen to me. But I was shook. I had to adjust my thinking to accommodate this experience, both the restaurant and the meal itself, and the fact that complete strangers would offer this incredible gift, to us, with no expectation of payment. Thomas Keller was not at the restaurant that night, but as we drove out of town the next day we dropped off a printed out copy of the photo they took in the kitchen and a pre-addressed postage tube. A few weeks later we received the signed photo from Thomas Keller, addressed to Kevin and his sous chef, my daughter Summer, and it just said, “It's all about family.” Amazing. Awesome. Filled with awe.

But this definition of awe – this vastness, and the subsequent reorienting to it – this makes us believe that awe is something that probably happens very rarely, like this meal, like seeing the Grand Canyon, like the birth of a child, like the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and three thousand people joining our church. And maybe that's what awe is when we don't expect to see it.

And yet, just like the early church that we read about, when we are rooted in the Holy Spirit, when we experience the love of the church, then awe becomes something that is both very precious and rare, and also very common. We can find awe in the meal of a lifetime, and we can find awe in the meal we will share here, together, a small meal of bread and juice. We can be filled with awe at this utopian image of the early church in which everyone shares everything and gets along and no one is in need and no one suffers. And we can be filled with awe at the sight of this church, at this body of friends and family who gather regularly to be reminded and to remind each other that we are made out of the love that God has for this very world, and that we, as we were created, are loved so much that God couldn't separate from us any longer and chose to live with us, as one of us, to gather at table with us, and to be that table for us.

Because when we are filled with awe, when we expect the awe-some power of God to be in our midst, then it's easier to see how life-changing, life-blessing the church can be, and maybe why three thousand people might want to join. When we welcome a stranger, or sit on a committee, or sing the hymn poorly, or just show up - in-person, or flip on the computer and take a moment to be the church: when we do the things that feel common and routine and even boring, but we do them with the love of Christ in our hearts, then all of a sudden these small acts become vast, and they cause a reorientation, a reimagining of what we thought was possible.

And yes, that meal at Per Se was worthy of awe. But as I realized much later, that the meal, the bill, even the experience of sharing this with Kevin – it wasn't that unique, which made it even more special. The weird coda to this story is just this summer, I was watching the TV show *The Bear*, about a chef who had had worked at the equivalent of Per Se and is starting a new restaurant, and he sends his cousin in as an intern for a week to learn how they pull off these 14 courses and these experiences of a lifetime. And at this restaurant, they're going through the list of guests for the evening, and they say, like off to the side, this one's a VIP, this one's the governor, this one is an anniversary, let's comp them and bring them back for to the kitchen for a visit.

And it just hit me - my once-in-a-lifetime experience, this awe-some unforgettable kindness, this exquisite food, this vast experience that reoriented my thinking of what was even possible, this was routine for them. They made lots of people feel the way that I felt. They bring people back every night, they comp thousand dollar meals all the time, that's part of the experience. And In retrospect, that only makes sense, and about 1% of me feels a little embarrassed. But the other 99% is in awe, that these chefs can make people feel this way all the time. And so can we, the church.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." That's all they did; we do the same thing. And Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles." And they are, and with God's help, they will be.

As we come to this table, and enter this season of awe, I pray that we might know the awe-some love of God, a love that is both transcendent and common, utopian and practical, something to strive for, and something we have the opportunity to live each and every day. Let us come table that is filled with awe. May it be so. Bon Appetit, and Amen.